10

Remembering Fatima and Zaynab: Gender in Perspective

Zayn Kassam and Bridget Blomfield

In the Muslim sacred universe, the central configuration connecting divine guidance to the realm of creation rests in the figure of the Prophet Muhammad, through whom the Quran was revealed. Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, is considered to be the true spiritual and temporal legatee of the Prophet in his twin roles as receiver of divine guidance and leader of the nascent community of Muslims. For the Shi'a, Muhammad's daughter and Ali's wife, Fatima, takes on special significance in her role connecting the prophetic lineage of Muhammad with the lineage of the imams. This chapter considers Fatima, her daughter Zaynab, women associated with the events at Karbala, and Fatima's descendant Nafisa, as exemplars for the faithful in ways that shape and are shaped by the sacred universe. A section on women holding key political positions during the time of the Fatimids illustrates the engagement of Shi'i women in public life. The chapter ends with the manner in which Fatima and Zaynab are remembered today, and continue to embody models of courage, perseverance and resistance and agency for Shi'i women in particular.

Fatima

Fatima is the cherished daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, born to the Prophet and his first wife Khadija in 605 ce, though she is also considered in Shi'i sources to have been born later. Known for her piety, endurance and industriousness, she was consoled at the death of her mother by her father, who said that the angel Jibril (Gabriel) had informed him that God had built a palace for her in Paradise. Tradition relates that her father turned down several offers of marriage for her but accepted Ali's, whom she is thought to have married in 622 or 623, a marriage that began in straitened circumstances until the general lot of Muslims improved after the Battle of Khyber in 629. The marriage ended ten years later with her death. The *tasbih* (repetition of names or phrases as an act

of glorification and supplication) of Fatima dates from the early period of her marriage, when, according to tradition, in a state of exhaustion, Fatima asked her father for a servant girl to help her. Her father asked if instead she would like something of greater value than the entire world, upon which he taught her to recite *Allahu akbar* 34 times, *al-hamdu lillah* 33 times, and *subhan allah* 33 times. Although not directly mentioned in the Quran, exegetes have connected verses such as 33:33 to her, in which the *ahl al-bayt* are understood by Shi'i exegetes as referring to Muhammad, Ali, Fatima, Hasan and Husayn, the latter two being the sons of Ali and Fatima. Relations between Aisha, the Prophet's youngest wife, and Fatima may have been strained, according to a *hadith* report that 'Aisha disapproved of what Fatima used to say' (Bukhari, 7:63:245). After her father's death, Fatima was drawn into the dispute over succession in two ways. First, according to Shi'i tradition, the pregnant Fatima suffered injuries and broken ribs at the hands of Umar when he came to the household to exact Ali's loyalty to Abu Bakr, designated by influential members of the community as the first caliph after Muhammad. The result was Fatima's miscarriage of her unborn son Muhsin and, a few months later, her death during the month of Ramadan. Second, the confiscation of the Prophet's properties led Fatima to appeal to Abu Bakr for her share, comprising the estate of Fadak, which she claimed to have been gifted to her by her father, and her share from the battle of Khyber. She was denied both by the new caliph on the grounds that the Prophet had said that 'prophets do not leave behind an inheritance', and his wealth should be used as *sadaqa* for charitable purposes. It is said that she asked for news of her impending death to be withheld until after she had been buried so as prevent the possibility of Abu Bakr officiating at her funeral. She was survived by her husband Ali, their two sons, Hasan and Husayn, and their two daughters, Zaynab and Umm Kulthum.

Sahih al-Bukhari, widely regarded as one of the most trusted *hadith* collections by Sunni Muslims, narrates a tradition from the Prophet's youngest and favourite wife Aisha, according to which Fatima is lauded as holding the position of mistress of all the women on earth and in Paradise (4:56:819). In addition, Fatima holds a tremendously important place in the historical development of Shi'ism. She is the 'mother of the imamate' by giving birth to the first living male heirs of the Prophet Muhammad. As such, in addition to the intrinsic qualities that make her a model for the faithful, especially Shi'i women, Fatima has over the centuries developed a spiritual significance that is central to the Shi'i worldview. Adored by her father, according to Shi'i tradition, Fatima's birth was surrounded by light. She is referred to as Fatima al-Zahra, 'the radiant, luminous, most shining one' and is considered pure and spotless, a heavenly intercessor. The 12th-century Shi'i scholar Ibn

Shahrashub connects Fatima's radiance to *walaya*: 'God created Paradise from the light of His countenance; He took this light, and threw it; with a third of it He struck Muhammad, with another third Fatima, and with the remaining third Ali and the People of the House.'[1] The renowned and influential Shi'i scholar Majlisi (d. 1698), in explaining why Fatima is titled al-Zahra, recounts a *hadith* in which the light normally attributed to the sun's rays at daybreak, during the day, and evening are seen to be emanating from Fatima — a light that endures until the birth of Husayn, after which it proceeds through each of the subsequent imams. Identifying this light as the *nur-i Muhammadiyya*, the light of the Prophet, it is inherited by his descendants through Fatima. Indeed, she represents the confluence of two lights (*majma al-nurayn*), bringing the *tanzil* ('that which descends', that is, revelation) of Muhammad (exoteric knowledge) together with the *ta'wil* ('that which is taken back to its source', that is, its interpretation) of Ali (esoteric knowledge). Anointed as the Pure One, Fatima is born pure and dies pure, and does not menstruate. Thus she was honoured with the title *batul* (virgin). She is considered the womb of the world, the mother of all things. 'God created Fatima from the light, first a spirit without a body, then he touched us with His right hand and His light shone in us.'[2] The Prophet Muhammad related that Fatima is 'a pure and blessed child; and that the Almighty God will indeed create my lineage through her, and will choose from my lineage a number of *a'imma* [imams] appointing them as His *khulafa* [caliphs] on His earth after the completion of His revelation'.[3] He added: 'Fatima is a part of me; what hurts her hurts me, and what pleases her pleases me. Verily God becomes angry when Fatima is angry and is pleased when she is pleased.'[4]

As a redemptrix, it is believed that, 'on the day of Resurrection, Fatima will stand at the gate of Hell, and on the forehead of every man will be written '*mu'min*' [believer] or '*kafir*' [unbeliever].'[5] Yet if the sinner has loved Fatima and wept on behalf of her suffering and the suffering of her family, 'lover' will be stamped between his eyes and she will intercede on his behalf so that he is not sent to burn in hell. The shedding of tears in

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1 Cited in Karen G. Ruffle, *Gender, Sainthood, and Everyday Practice in South Asian Shi'ism* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2011), p. 82.

2 Jawahir al-Amili, as quoted by Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of Ashura in Twelver Shi'ism* (The Hague, 1978), p. 56.

3 Mostafa Hosayni, *Sayyedat Nesa al-Alamen: Chief of the Women of the World* (UK, 2003), p. 28.

4 Ibn Babawayh, *Ma'ani al-akhbar*, ed. Ali Akbar al-Ghaffari (Tehran, 1959), p. 303.

5 Ali Shariati, *Shariati on Shariati and the Muslim Woman*, tr. Laleh Bakhtiar (Chicago, 1996), p. 214.

honour of Fatima and her family, the *ahl al-bayt* (people of the house) is critically important in Shi'i soteriology. The eminent 11th-century theologian, al-Shaykh al-Mufid, reports that Fatima stands at the gates of Paradise on the Day of Judgment, and will be compensated for her own suffering by being granted the power to save all those who pray to her. She carries the *al-jami'a*, a scroll that is 70 yards long. Upon this scroll is written everything that humanity needs to know until the end of time.

As the wife of Imam Ali she becomes the mother of the imamate. Many of the imams were martyred, making her the mistress of the House of Sorrows. Her sons Hasan and Husayn were martyred defending Islam. For the Shi'a, she maintains a status similar to the Virgin Mary for many Christians, a mother whose son, Jesus, was also martyred. Both Mary and Fatima are considered role models for women who have suffered and been oppressed, and who have experienced injustice.

Fatima represents the perfect woman as an earthly, human creature but also as an instrument of divine means for attaining spiritual wholeness. Her piety is depicted in stories narrated in *hadith*s, in the writings of Shi'i scholars, and in modern-day narratives both oral and written detailing her as generous, given to simplicity, and modest. One such story describes her gift to a poor woman. Not knowing that Fatima was soon to be married, the woman told Fatima that she had no dress to wear to her own wedding. Fatima took her wedding dress and gave it to the poor woman. God, so impressed by this selfless action, gifted Fatima with heavenly garments. 'He showed them a Being, adorned with a myriad of glittering lights of various colours, who sat on a throne, a crown on her head, rings in her ears, a drawn sword by her side.'[6] Fatima was given the gift of 'heavenly clothes' from the angel Jibril and on the day of her wedding, 70,000 angels accompanied her. This heavenly clothing can be interpreted as a mantle that concealed and enveloped her mystical powers. Her robes of light shield and protect anyone that turns toward her in need. Such imagery suggests that if one remains faithful, pious, and charitable there are heavenly rewards after death.

As a holy woman, Fatima transforms suffering through her faith and her ability to surrender to the will of God. She is the mistress of heaven and earth and is a mediator between this world and the next. Her significance not only derives from her connections to her illustrious family, but from her own merits, as expressed by the late Iranian intellectual, Ali Shariati:

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[6] Louis Massignon, 'Die Ursprunge und die Bedeutung des Gnostizismus im Islam', *Eranos Jahrbuch*, 5 (1937), pp. 64–65.

I wanted to say, Fatimeh is the daughter of noble Khadijeh.
I saw, this is not Fatimeh.
I wanted to say, Fatimeh is the daughter of Muhammad.
I saw, this is not Fatimeh.
I wanted to say, Fatimeh is the wife of Ali.
I saw, this is not Fatimeh.
I wanted to say, Fatimeh is the mother of Hasan and Husayn.
I saw, this is not Fatimeh.
I wanted to say, Fatimeh is the mother of Zaynab.
Still, I saw that this is not Fatimeh.
No, she is all of these but all of these are not Fatimeh.
Fatimeh is Fatimeh.[7]

After the 1979 Iranian revolution, cemeteries in Iran were renamed *bihisht*, the Persian word for Paradise, with the largest cemetery in Tehran being called Behesht-e Zahra, the Paradise of Zahra, Zahra the Mother of Martyrs, thus symbolically portraying the notion that 'the holy female figure, after which the cemetery is named, will be viewed as the mother of those who are no longer with us.' Fatima is the heavenly figure that in her earthly life embodies piety, patience and perseverance. Her daughter Zaynab, also beloved by the Shi'a, became a focal point of resistance to oppression as she became an outspoken granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad in demanding justice for her martyred family. After the death of her mother, Zaynab continued the female legacy of the Prophet Muhammad's family and the message of justice in Islam.

Zaynab

Zaynab bint Ali, the third child of Ali and Fatima, is thought to have been born in 626. Referred to as Sayyida Zaynab, she exemplifies the essence of bravery and courage due to her role in the aftermath of Karbala, to which place she had accompanied her brother Husayn. Following his decapitation and the loss of many of his companions (traditionally numbered at 72), including her two sons Aun and Muhammad, Zaynab along with other captives were marched to Damascus, Yazid I's capital. It was there, at Yazid's palace that Zaynab offered the first *majlis* of lamentation mourning the deaths of her brother Husayn and their kinsmen, continued today in the rites observed during the first ten days of the month of Muharram. Women especially relate to her because she embodied the empowered woman, angered sister and

[7] Ali Shariati, 'Fatimeh is Fatimeh', quoted from Laleh Bakhtiar, tr., *Shariati on Shariati and the Muslim Woman* (Chicago, 1996), p. 216.

outraged mother when she delivered her famous monologue at the court of Yazid. Reminding Yazid that he was the descendant of his father and grandparents who had been set free by her grandfather at the surrender of Mecca, she called him to task for pulling out 'the roots of piety and virtue' and for shedding the blood of the sons of the Prophet 'under the clouds of oppression and justice'.[8] Her radical assumption of authority won her the admiration of her people and even more deeply the loyalty and love of women. Her courage was enormous, to such a degree that in some communities she is simply referred to as al-Sayyida (descendant of the Prophet) without the use of a first name. Her second courageous act concerns the order given by the governor of Kufa sentencing Ali Zayn al-Abidin, the sole surviving son of Husayn, to death. Throwing herself over him, she declared to the governor that to kill Ali, he would first have to kill her. Thus, as protector of fatherless children, Zaynab is compared to 'the shining moon and the heroine of all time' as she is seen 'above man'.

> Don't call her a woman, she is above man, she is more faithful than a man
> Don't call her a woman, there is no one more courageous than Zaynab
> Don't call her a woman, there is no one more knowledgeable than Zaynab
> In her bravery and wisdom so similar to Haydar Safdar (Ali)
> Who is the one with pious knowledge, the protector of women's interest?[9]

Considered the source of wisdom for women, she is called Zinat, the Jewel of Paradise, the light of God. Zaynab embodies the perfect balance of the masculine and feminine attributes that many saints reflect. Eshtehardi describes her qualities as such:

> Her personality was like Khadija's, her modesty and chastity like her mother Fatima's, and the sweetness of her speech was like her father Ali's, her revolutionary dream and patience was

[8] Abu'l-Fazl Ahmad b. Abi Tahir, *Balaghatun Nisa*, available online at: http://www.al-islam.org/probe-history-ashura-dr-ibrahim-ayati/chapter-32-sermon-lady-zaynab-court-yazid (accessed 5 December 2013).

[9] F. Shirazi, 'The Daughters of Karbala: Images of Women in Popular Shi'i Culture in Iran', in Kamran Scot Aghaie, ed., *The Women of Karbala* (Austin, TX, 2005), pp. 109–110.

> like her brother Hasan's, her courage and strength of heart was like her brother Husayn's.[10]

She is a constant reminder that the human spirit will fight against and triumph over oppression and is seen as a heroine by Shi'i Muslim women, not as a victim. She died in 682, six months after being released by Yazid. Her tomb in Cairo at the Sayyida Zaynab Mosque is considered to be her final resting place, although a similar claim is made for the mosque of the same name in Damascus.

The Women of Karbala

The events of Karbala and its aftermath are, 'refracted through a woman's universe because the women survived the battle',[11] and offer an occasion for a memorial signifying the centrality of Fatima and Zaynab to the Shi'i sacred narrative. Already mentioned are Fatima's roles as the progenitrix of the imams and her redemptive role as their grieving mother beginning with the slaughter of her son Husayn and followed by the sufferings experienced by subsequent imams and members of her family, the *ahl al-bayt*. Fatima is commemorated each Muharram (also known as 'the month of Zaynab') in the *zaban-i hal* (biographical sketches) recited at *nawha* (lamentations) and *taziya*, the theatrical performances similar to a passion play that recollect, re-enact and recount the lives of the Prophet, Fatima and the twelve imams, also known as the 'Fourteen Infallibles' of the Ithna 'ashari Shi'a. The *taziya* serves to revitalise and reinforce Shi'i identity and the commitment to working for justice, revolutionary if need be, as evidenced during the 1979 Iranian Revolution, against oppression. Zaynab stands out for her role in naming and defying Yazid I's oppression of her kinsmen and community, for initiating the mourning rites for her brother Husayn, and for shielding her nephew Ali Zayn al-Abidin and saving him from death, thereby playing a critical role in the continuation of the imamate. Thus, Zaynab, too, becomes an intercessor for those who grieve for the holy family.

In addition, there were other women associated with Karbala that played lesser but significant roles, and several studies of lamentation rites and the *taziya* mention dozens of female characters that take part in the story of Karbala. The women most often mentioned are female relatives or

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[10] Mohammad Mohammadi Eshtehardi, *Hazrat-e Zeynab, payam resan-e shahidan-e Karbala* (Tehran, 1997), p. 9, cited in Kamran Scot Aghaie, ed., *The Martyrs of Karbala* (Seattle, WA, 2004), p. 126.

[11] Ruffle, *Gender, Sainthood, and Everyday Practice*, p. 99.

women connected in some way to the holy family, for example, apart from Fatima and Zaynab, mother and sister, respectively, of Imam Husayn, Khadija, his grandmother; his sister Umm Kulthum; his wife, Umm Layla, or Shahrbanu, mother of Husayn's slain infant Ali Asghar; his four daughters, Kulthum, Sakina, who begs her uncle Abbas to fetch water for the thirsty camp, whose access to the river has been cut off by Yazid's army, Fatima (her cousin Qasim's bride, also known as Fatima Kubra, who lost her husband on their wedding day), and little Ruqayya, forced to walk barefoot in captivity to Damascus, where she died; Umm Salama, the Prophet's wife who helped bring up Hasan and Husayn; a Christian convert; and Qasim's mother. Often included is a woman named Tuwih, who sheltered Husayn's messenger and exemplifies loyalty to the imam. These women are portrayed as, and serve as exemplars, as loyal, moral, courageous and pious individuals who endured suffering due to oppression. They mourn the martyrdom of their menfolk, whom were sacrificed for the sake of justice, and suffer humiliation in captivity, after burying their dead. Some of them, such as the fighter Wahb's wife Haniya, attempt to dash into the battlefield and are called back by Imam Husayn; their sacrifice thus consists of giving up their loved ones in battle, as did Wahb's mother in sending him into battle. Umm Kulthum, Zaynab's sister, and Sakina, Husayn's four-year-old daughter, join Zaynab in calling oppressive men and betrayers of Husayn's cause, such as the Kufans, to task, regardless of their station. In contemporary rituals, supplicants offer prayers at the reconstructed bridal chamber of Qasim and Fatima to seek help for resolution in matters pertaining to marriage, while at the grave of Ruqayya, help is sought for matters pertaining to children.[12]

Kamran Scot Aghaie argues that Shi'i symbols and rituals such as the *taziya* affect women on many levels: personally for psychological, emotional, spiritual and soteriological effects; for articulating gender ideals and the passing on of gender-specific identities; for establishing and preserving social bonds, identities and status; and finally, for reinforcing social norms for women while providing opportunities for independence, influence and public social participation for some women. The symbolism of Karbala, he notes, communicates several messages concerning women:

> First, the greatest and most worthy social status for women derives from piety, along with devotion to Islam and the family of the Prophet. Second, women had the ability, and

[12] Ingvild Flaskerud, '"Oh, My Heart Is Sad. It Is Moharram, the Month of Zaynab?" The Role of Aesthetics and Women's Mourning Ceremonies in Shiraz', in Aghaie, ed., *The Women of Karbala*, p. 88.

> the authority to preserve, transmit, and articulate the values of Shi'ism. Third, the precedent was established for women to encourage or even demand that the men in their family conform to religious ideals of behavior. And finally, women were given the right, or even the responsibility, to challenge male authority when a man acted in an impious manner, even if he was the ruling caliph.[13]

Fatima's legacy in Egypt: Sayyida Nafisa

Fatima had another distinguished female descendant, Sayyida Nafisa, the great-granddaughter of her son Hasan. Born in Mecca in 762, she moved to Medina as a young child with her father, Hasan al-Anwar, son of Zayd al-Ablaj, son of Hasan, son of Fatima and Ali. There she became renowned for her renunciation (*zuhd*) and piety (*taqwa*), her knowledge of the Quran, the *hadith* and the law, her frequent visits to Muhammad's grave, and her pilgrimages to Mecca. It is said that she also studied with the great jurist, Malik b. Anas. She was married to Ishaq al-Mutamin, son of the Imam Jafar al-Sadiq, the great-grandson of Husayn and to avoid the persecution then faced by the *ahl al-bayt*, emigrated with him from the Hijaz to Egypt, where there is a mosque bearing her name. Her husband returned to Medina when appointed governor there by the Abbasids, and did not return to Egypt until she died in 824. She bore him two children, a son, al-Qasim, and a daughter, Umm Kulthum.

The titles attached to her name, Nafisa, meaning precious, attest to her spiritual and temporal knowledge, her steadfastness in piety and prayer, and the love and esteem with which she was held: *al-tahira* (the Lady of Purity), *al-ilmi wa'l-ma'rifa* (the Lady of Knowledge and Gnosis), *al-abida* (the Lady of Divine Servanthood), *al-darayn* (the Lady of Two Realms, that is, this world and the next), *sahiba al-karamat* (the Mistress of Miracles), *sayyida ahl al-fatwa* (Distinguished Lady among those pronouncing legal rulings), *umm al-awajiz* (the Mother of the Elderly), and *al-Misriyyin* (the Lady of the Egyptians). These titles indicate what has come down about her through history and hagiography. She was learned, and counted luminaries such as the jurist al-Shafi'i and the mystic Dhu al-Nun al-Misri among her interlocutors and students. Her piety was of such renown that people came from near and far to seek her blessings: hagiographies recount her decision to leave Egypt due to the throngs that came to seek the blessings of the *ahl al-bayt*, leaving little time for prayer and the discomfiture of imposing on the hospitality

[13] Kamran Scot Aghaie, 'The Gender Dynamics of Moharram Symbols and Rituals in the Latter Years of Qajar Rule', in *The Women of Karbala*, pp. 54–55.

of the governor of Egypt, who had hosted the family in Cairo. The intervention of the governor, his gift of a larger residence, and the pleas of the people for her not to leave Egypt convinced her to stay. Numerous accounts are given of the miracles she performed for those who sought her aid directly or through prayer, such as curing a blind girl, intervening when the Nile did not rise one year as expected, preventing a ship from sinking, helping a woman who spent her life spinning wool to support her family, freeing a prisoner through her intercession, and seeing people through their difficulties. A pilgrimage to Mecca occasioned the vivid appearance of the spirit of Ibrahim (Abraham), who remained her guide till the end of her days.

Fatimid Women

The legacy of Fatima continues with the Fatimids, an Ismaili Shi'i dynasty that ruled from 909 to 1171 – and as Delia Cortese and Simonetta Calderini observe, 'the only Islamic dynasty to be named after a woman'.[14] At its height, the Fatimid empire stretched from the Atlantic coast in North Africa to the Red Sea, and included within its jurisdiction Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Sicily, the Red Sea coast of Africa, Yemen, Tihama and the Hijaz. In Cairo, ca. 970 or 972, al-Azhar was established as a place of learning by the Fatimids, considered one of the first universities in the world, and paying homage in its name to Fatima, who was titled al-Zahra (the Radiant or Resplendent), hence the name al-Azhar. Al-Qadi al-Nu'man (d. 974), the foremost jurist of the Fatimids, held that Fatima's *khutba* or speech about the dispute over Fadak – the estate she inherited from her father – was to be understood symbolically: Fadak stood for the Prophet's bequest to her in her role as progenitrix of the imams subsequent to Ali. The issue of injustice with regard to a woman's inheritance, as in the case of Fatima, led al-Numan to specify that if a woman was the sole survivor of a deceased person, then she should inherit the full amount, regardless of her gender. Such a view is echoed in more widespread Shi'i inheritance practices as well. 'Shi'i inheritance law … gives more rights than does Sunni law to certain female relations, especially daughters, and to relations on the female as well as the male side', observes Nikkie Keddie. 'This may be in part because the imams' descent from the Prophet passed through the female line…'.[15] Fatima's name or titles are found on Fatimid coins

[14] Delia Cortese and Simonetta Calderini, *Women and the Fatimids in the World of Islam* (Edinburgh, 2006), p. 232.
[15] Nikkie R. Keddie, *Women in the Middle East: Past and Present* (Princeton, NJ, 2007), p. 28.

and talismans; her birthday was commemorated as a holiday; and the recitation of her *tasbih* was thought to garner blessings the weight of a thousand good deeds.

Two other major female figures are associated with the Fatimids – Sitt al-Mulk, and Queen Arwa, titled al-Sayyida al-Hurra, of the Ismaili Sulayhid dynasty in Yemen. The first counts Fatima as her direct forebear, being the daughter of her descendant al-Aziz, the fifth Fatimid imam-caliph while the second was a staunch supporter of the Fatimid cause. Sitt al-Mulk, the daughter of al-Aziz, was born in 970 in Mansuriyya. Endowed with natural political gifts, Sitt al-Mulk is said to have lived in an exquisitely appointed palace, employed close to 4,000 slave-girls, had an army division called the *al-atufiyya*, trained by her employee Atuf, as part of her entourage, and patronised the building of several *hamam*s (bathhouses) and with her mother, the construction of the Jami al-Qarafa, the second mosque to be built by the Fatimids after al-Azhar. At her father's death in 996, she sought to block the designated heir, her half-brother al-Mansur, to be known as al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah, from acceding to the imamate by staging what historical sources have termed a palace coup d'état, which was successfully thwarted by al-Hakim's guardian, the eunuch Barjawan. Historians have seen in this episode evidence of a broader struggle between the *maghariba*, those army factions from North Africa who had supported the dynasty from its rise, and the *mashariqa*, the soldiers from the eastern Islamic heartlands who had increasingly been imported by al-Aziz to manage the affairs of the caliphal administration. Barjawan rapidly consolidated his power, leading Sitt al-Mulk to withdraw from political interference while lavishing her younger half-brother with gifts. However, the assassination of Barjawan by al-Saqalibi, her ally in the attempted palace coup, facilitated her rise to power.

Al-Hakim not only conferred land and titles upon her but made her his key advisor on all matters relating to state, trusting her advice. One example was his deft handling of grievances stemming from tax burdens in Syria upon her advice. However, al-Hakim's handling of several other crises over the next decade – including an anti-Fatimid revolt in North Africa, judicial and monetary problems in Egypt, the Jarrahid revolt in Palestine, and the movement in the *da'wa* proclaiming the divinity of al-Hakim – led to a rift between them. The historian al-Maqrizi asserts that al-Hakim's attempts to rein in the intrigues of the womenfolk of the palace resulted in either the banishment or drowning of a large number of them. The historian Ibn Taghribirdi reports that Sitt al-Mulk offered refuge to al-Hakim's wife Amina and their son Ali at this time. In addition, several key functionaries close to Sitt al-Mulk were punished or killed, causing the princess once again to withdraw from public life. In 1021, al-Hakim disappeared, leaving a trail of torn and bloodied clothes,

causing medieval historians to speculate that Sitt al-Mulk was likely to have been behind the attack and disappearance. Cortese and Calderini note that:

> Ever since, the shadow of suspicion has been hanging over her and, alas, it is to her reputation as a possible fratricidal murderer that ultimately she owes her fame. Several reasons have been adduced for her supposed action; fear for her personal safety; the increasingly bizarre behaviour of her brother, especially against women; his elimination of several of her closest collaborators; and her disapproval of her brother's succession plans.[16]

However, the Fatimid courtier al-Quda'i noted half a century later that Sitt al-Mulk exposed the Berber chief, Ibn Dawwas, as the person responsible for the murder and had him killed by the deceased imam-caliph's men. It remains unclear whether or not al-Hakim's policies and measures were attempts to wrest power away from a politically ambitious Sitt al-Mulk, as well as perhaps responses to wider economic and political conditions in the Mediterranean.

Following al-Hakim's disappearance and likely death, Sitt al-Mulk, like her forebear Zaynab, is once again seen as responsible for ensuring that the direct line of the progeny of Fatima succeeded to the imamate, which would otherwise have passed to a grandson of al-Mahdi, still a Fatimid but not of the direct hereditary line. As de facto ruler of the Fatimid state between the death of al-Hakim and the proclamation of the next imam-caliph in 1021, she reportedly ordered a series of killings aimed at protecting the young al-Zahir, while also taking action to persecute the *da'i*s responsible for proclaiming al-Hakim's divinity. She lifted restrictions placed by the deceased caliph on women, Christians, Jews, music and wine, allowing non-Muslims to restore their houses of worship, reclaimed land grants that had been disbursed, reinstated taxes abolished by al-Hakim, and restored the financial affairs of the state to order,[17] while also working to re-establish diplomatic relations and negotiations with the Byzantine emperor in connection with the expansionist policies of Byzantium in the eastern Mediterranean. In 1021, the 17-year-old Ali, son of al-Hakim, was proclaimed imam-caliph under the title al-Zahir li-I'zaz Din Allah. Sitt al-Mulk died, ostensibly of diarrhoea, in 1023.

The medieval Yemeni queen, Arwa, bore witness in her will to 'Fatima, the "radiant and pure", as the fifth among the elected *ashab*, or People of

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[16] Cortese and Calderini, *Women and the Fatimids*, p. 123.

[17] Yaacov Lev, *State and Society in Fatimid Egypt* (Leiden, 1991), pp. 36–37.

the House'.[18] Born around 1048 in Haraz, Arwa was raised by the queen-consort Asma at the palace of the founder of the Sulayhid dynasty, the Fatimid *da'i* and sultan, Ali b. Muhammad al-Sulayhi. The Sulayhids ruled Yemen for the better part of a century, and Ali, the son of a well-respected Shafi'i judge from the Banu Hamdan tribe, espoused the Fatimid cause and ruled as their vassal, establishing San'a as his capital and having the *khutba* pronounced in the name of the Fatimid Ismaili imam-caliphs throughout his dominions. Viewed by the Fatimids as a strategically important outpost for their *da'wa* activities, especially for those in India, Yemen was also important for military, political and commercial interests to the Fatimids. In 1067, Ali and Asma were taken captive by the Najahids of Zabid; Ali was killed while Asma was eventually rescued by her son Ahmad al-Mukarram (d. 1084), whom she assisted in dealing with the affairs of state until her own death in 1074.

Under Asma's tutelage, the young Arwa was educated in letters, the Quran, history, poetry, and was noted for her beauty, piety and intelligence. She was married to Ahmad al-Mukarram in either 1065 or 1069, upon which she received the revenue of Aden as a dowry from her father-in-law, Ali. Her husband's war injuries sustained in 1074–1075 made him a paraplegic shortly after the death of his mother Asma. While al-Mukarram remained nominally the ruler of the Sulayhid state, Arwa effectively took charge, moving the capital from San'a to Dhu Jibla, and having her name read in the *khutba* after that of the Fatimid Imam-caliph al-Mustansir as a sign of her authority. Her son, Ali Abd al-Mustansir, confirmed as ruler by the Fatimid state after the death of her husband, died some six years after his father. Arwa remained the effective queen of the Sulayhid territories, increasingly beset by tribal fighting, till her death in 1138, leaving behind no living heirs and hence marking the end of the Sulayhid dynasty. Buried in the Friday Mosque at Dhu Jibla, where a shrine to her exists to this day, she is remembered fondly by Yemenis as Bilqis al-Sughra, the 'little' Queen of Sheba.

The Fatimid Imam-caliph al-Mustansir's death in Cairo in 1094 led to a crisis over the succession, with some Ismailis confirming the succession of his son Nizar, and others opting to support the claims of his son al-Musta'li. Sayyida Hurra threw her support and allegiance behind the latter, and a dispute over the succession to al-Musta'li's son al-Amir led to a conflict between the supporters of his son al-Tayyib and those of his cousin al-Hafiz. Queen Arwa upheld the succession of al-Tayyib, and is consequently to be credited for the success of the Tayyibi Ismaili *da'wa*, which continues to have followers in Yemen, the Indian subcontinent and other parts of the world. Her role in preserving Fatimid

[18] Cortese and Calderini, *Women and the Fatimids*, p. 135.

Ismaili manuscripts and her 'devotion to Ismailism and the cause of al-Tayyib found its final expression in her will in which she bequeathed her renowned collection of jewellery to Imam al-Tayyib'.[19] In Tayyibi sources, she is acknowledged as a *hujja*, the highest rank in any region's *da'wa* hierarchy, thus combining the political role of head of state (*malika*) with the spiritually authoritative role of the head of the *da'wa* (*hujja*) in Yemen. Daftary, in contrast to Cortese and Calderini, writes that the Fatimid Imam-caliph al-Mustansir appointed her the *hujja* of Yemen shortly after her husband's death – the first time such a post had ever been given to a woman. Cortese and Calderini note only that a *sijill* (letter) from Imam al-Mustansir confirms her as the authority to whom all Yemeni *da'i*s should report, but that the term *hujja* is not used except in Tayyibi sources. Regardless, her significant role in the affairs of the Fatimid *da'wa* in Yemen and the Indian subcontinent cannot be contested, nor her role in the establishment of the independent Tayyibi *da'wa*, which survived the fall of both the Sulayhids and the Fatimids.

Fatima and Zaynab Today

The contemporary legacy of Fatima and Zaynab is especially visible in connection with the 1979 Iranian Revolution. As noted earlier in this chapter, the Iranian revolutionary ideologue Ali Shariati conceptualised Fatima as a person in her own right, rather than as instrumentally important in relation to her father, the Prophet Muhammad, her husband Ali, the first imam, and her sons Hasan and Husayn. For Shariati, Fatima stands as a paradigm of courage, patience and steadfastness, as well as faith and piety. As such, he called upon Iranian women to mobilise against injustice in their own right, not for the sake of their menfolk. Yet he provides very little actual information about her apart from her connections to the male figures of note in her life. Indeed, Shariati's stance ends up being largely instrumentalist in mobilising religious women to the cause of the revolution. In a similar vein, he draws upon Zaynab to assert:

> When Zaynab saw that the revolution had begun, she left her family, her husband and her children, and joined the revolution. It was not for the sake of her brother Husayn, who was the leader of this revolution, that she joined it. She did so because of her own responsibility and commitment to her society, her

[19] Farhad Daftary, 'Sayyida Hurra: The Isma'ili Sulayhid Queen of Yemen', in Gavin R. G. Hambly, ed., *Women in the Medieval Islamic World* (New York, 1998), p. 127.

> religion and her God. When she saw that a struggle and revolution had begun against an oppressive system, she joined the revolution and was beside her brother Husayn at all stages of those difficult days. Even after the martyrdom of Husayn and his companions, she carried the flag of the continuation of Karbala's revolution. She performed her mission thoroughly, perfectly and fairly. She performed her mission with strength and courage. She expressed with words the truth that Husayn expressed with blood. She shouted out against tyranny in any land. She distributed the seeds of revolution in any land that she entered, either free or as a captive. It is no accident that Muslims, wherever they are, show a great and deep sympathy towards the Prophet's family and love them.
>
> Yes! All of these miracles belonged to a woman! Thus when a woman, a conscious and responsible, committed woman sees such heroics from a woman who belonged to Fatima's family, she understands where she must look, how she must be. She realises that a woman of any age and any century can emulate this model.[20]

For the Iranians supporting greater roles for women in the public sphere after the revolution, Zaynab has become a torchbearer for her speech and for speaking out in the face of injustice – at the same time that her memory was mobilised in the infamous vigilante group Dokhtaran-i Zaynab to enforce sartorial conventions for women.

For contemporary Shi'i communities, in the re-enactments of Karbala conducted annually wherever Ithna 'ashari Shi'a gather to observe Muharram rites (including in South Asia and the Western diaspora), the incorporation of Fatima and Zaynab in the ritual presents a powerful model for emulation by women in every aspect of their lives. In addition to these two key figures, there is the example of the eleven-year-old Fatima Kubra, daughter of Husayn, who was married to the thirteen-year-old Qasim, son of Hasan, on the day that he lost his life at Karbala. His exploits on the battlefield and her tragedy are remembered in the *mehndi* (henna) gatherings, *marthiya* (elegies), and moving speeches delivered by *zakir*s (orators) on the seventh day of the mourning assemblies of Muharram. In her work on South Asian Karbala traditions observed in Hyderabad, India, Karen Ruffle notes that Fatima Kubra symbolises the importance of fulfilling one's duty despite any hardships encountered, for men and women alike in their roles as members of a family as well as a community.

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[20] Ali Shariati, available online at: http://www.shariati.com/english/woman/woman3.html (accessed 14 December, 2013).

Rendered a bride and widow on the same day, her story invokes both joy and sorrow; this is typically linked, in the South Asian cultural context, to states of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness in the *azadar*s (mourners), calling upon both their sympathy and grief. Interestingly, widowhood is perceived as a form of protection for the young Fatima, for it prevents Yazid from forcibly marrying her off, as he could had she been a virgin of marriageable age. Her action in becoming a bride only to be made a widow is seen as the willing sacrifice she makes to send her husband into battle to preserve the faith; and she consents to her subsequent widowhood to preserve her family. In the Indic context, with its significations of the inauspiciousness of the widow, the hardship that Fatima Kubra undergoes is subverted by her sacrifice to save the holy family from despoliation —and also by the modelling of the ideals of wifehood and widowhood to mourners. At the same time, as regards her aunt Zaynab, as Lara Deeb observes in relation to Lebanese Ashura rituals:

> The incorporation of women into Ashura as active participants in the *masirat* [lamentation processions], and the reformulation of Zaynab as the ideal role model for women … have occurred in part self-consciously and represent an active engagement with discourses and arguments about Islam, gender, and modernness that extend beyond Shi'ism and Lebanon. … women are utilising the example of Sayyedeh Zaynab as an outspoken, strong, and compassionate activist to push the boundaries of what is acceptable and expected for pious Lebanese Shi'a women.[21]

Conclusion

In her study of contemporary Shi'i women's *azadari* or mourning rituals in southern California, Bridget Blomfield finds that from these the women participating draw great solace and comfort, as well as models, for handling the profound stresses brought upon by migration, often from war-torn contexts, to North America. In addition, personal suffering triggered by ill-health, unemployment, loss of loved ones and grief and the traumas resulting from dislocation, connect to and put a perspective on the suffering experienced by Fatima and Zaynab; this allows women to empathise with the women of the *ahl al-bayt* while also drawing moral support from their piety and their courage.

[21] Lara Z. Deeb, 'From Mourning to Activism: Sayyedeh Zaynab, Lebanese Shi'i Women, and the Transformation of Ashura', in Aghaie, ed., *The Women of Karbala*, pp. 359–360.

The town of Sayyida Zaynab (south of Damascus), originally founded as a refugee camp for Palestinians in 1949, was subsequently settled in by the Iraqi Shiʿa fleeing the conflict in Iraq, as well as the Twelver Shiʿa students from India, Pakistan and Afghanistan attending nearby seminaries. It is also much frequented by Shiʿi tourists from Iran and the Persian Gulf states. The town became an alternative centre of pilgrimage and learning for the Iraqi Shiʿa when the sites of Karbala and Najaf were inaccessible due to regional conflict. Indeed, in her examination of Zaynab's sainthood in Syria, Edith Szanto sees the town as living in a 'state of exception': the state imposes laws and regulations (such as withholding the right to vote, buy property, or in some case, to hold employment) to allow it to better control a population that is not strictly Syrian but resident within its sovereign borders. Szanto finds that women undermine this state of exception to connect with the *ahl al-bayt* and to make spiritual and material progress. Typically, they draw upon the intercession (*shafaʿa*) of Sayyida Zaynab through vows and ritual feasts such as the *sufra,* offered in her name, to ask for healing (*shifa*) and aid for problems concerning health, family life, work, or other difficulties. Interviews with women show that Shiʿi women exhibit agency in their lives as they strive to attain 'a good life' through serving Sayyida Zaynab, calling upon her to heal and intercede, drawing strength from her to educate their children and others on how to live a good life.

The challenges that Shiʿi women face must necessarily be understood in their specific historical, political, legal and social settings. For example, in Iran, Shiʿi women found that divorce laws left them in poverty as often their bridal endowments (*mahr*) were rendered worthless due to inflation or the death of their husband in war. Iranian women activists took recourse to the women's press to raise this issue, and to Iranian Islamic law to identify strategies to tackle inequalities associated with current marital regulations. Consequently, Ayatollah Khomeini had the law amended in 1982 to require that marriage contracts must accord wives half the husband's wealth upon divorce. Regardless of the issue to be addressed, the figures considered in this chapter provide, as Vincent Cornell notes, the double subjectivity of sainthood, authority and guidance in the sense of *wilaya* on the one hand, and of love and closeness in the sense of *walaya* on the other.[22] The upshot for the Shiʿi woman is that such figures provide exemplary guidance as she endures her afflictions, and a spiritualised connection with sacred and linear history in addressing them.

[22] Vincent J. Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism* (Austin, TX, 1981).

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